Andrew Winer

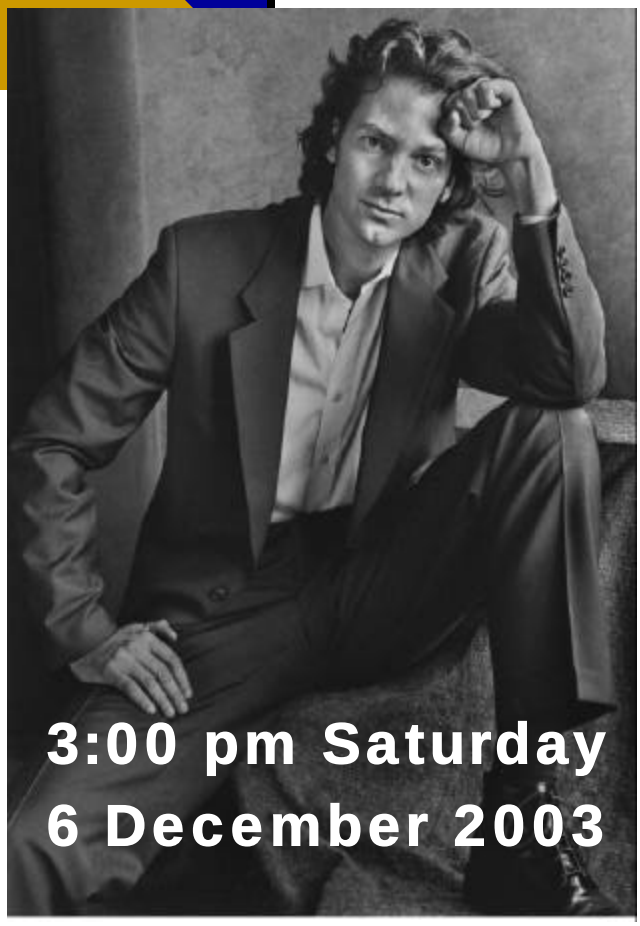

Photo by Marion Ettlinger

will read and discuss his work including his best-selling novel

The Color Midnight Made

3:00 pm Saturday
6 December 2003

Main Library Auditorium
3581 Mission Inn Avenue
Riverside, California
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Cultural Arts Programs

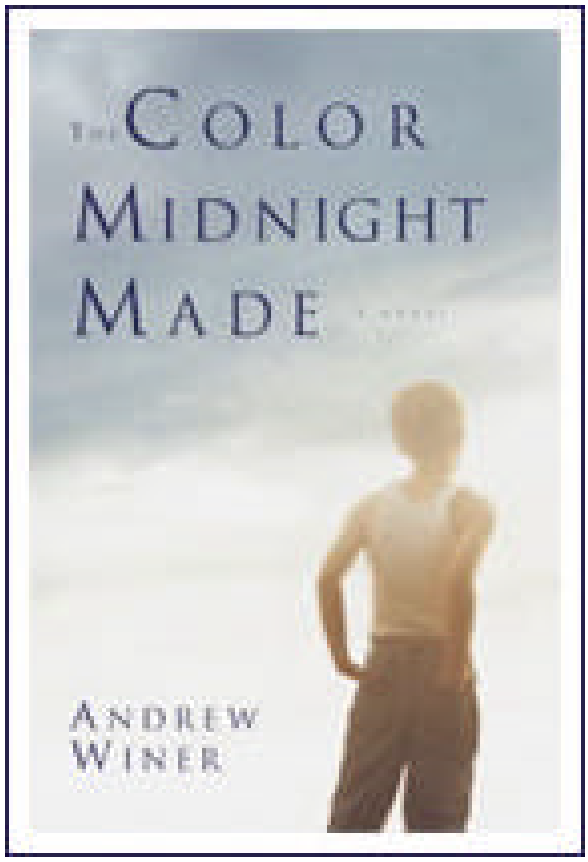
Riverside Public Library

BIOGRAPHY of Andrew Winer

Marion Ettlinger

Andrew Winer was raised in the San Francisco Bay Area. He nearly completed a degree in Computer Engineering at UCLA before entering that university's highly esteemed Art School and earning a B.A. in Fine Arts. He went on to earn an MFA in painting at Cal Arts and study at Skowhegan Art School in Maine before heading for New York to make paintings and apprentice with artist Ross Bleckner. Mr. Winer has had solo exhibitions of his paintings on both coasts.

In 1996, he was accepted to the University of California at Irvine's MFA Program in Fiction. During his time there, he wrote the book that would become *The Color Midnight Made*, and co-wrote an original screenplay titled "Honky!" that sold to New Regency and Fox. He currently lives in Southern California with his wife Charmaine Craig, author of The Good Men.



http://www.andrewwiner.com/biography.asp

A Conversation With
ANDREW WINER
Author of
THE COLOR MIDNIGHT MADE

Why did you choose to write a novel about a white boy living in a black neighborhood? What are you trying to say about race, and did you have a political agenda in mind during the novel's composition?

My interest in America's racial problems is not, on the whole, political, but personal and emotional. Growing up in the East Bay in and around Oakland, California, I was immersed in black culture. I didn't view it then as "black culture," but simply as the music, food, and manner of speaking to which I was accustomed. Like the protagonist of my novel, Conrad Clay, I was, and in many ways still am, both clinically and figuratively colorblind. Due to the circumstances of my childhood, which included being raised by a struggling single mother and attending racially mixed schools, I looked at black culture from the inside out, rather than from the outside looking in. One of the consequences of having black peers when you are young is that you become trained to be suspicious of white people (the incongruity of my holding such a suspicion while having white skin myself was entirely lost on me until years later) and to look at America from a black perspective, or through the lens of what Hilton Als, in his essay on Richard Pryor, calls "injured humanity."

My novel is informed by this perspective. It's the perspective of being an outsider. As a white boy surrounded by African Americans, I was an outsider in a community of outsiders. That I was imprinted by black culture before I learned that other Americans didn't necessarily share my love for it only made more painful my eventual realization that, as much as I loved black culture, I couldn't completely lay claim to it—I was white after all—and furthermore, that many of my early formed habits, linguistic and otherwise, weren't acceptable outside of black communities. Indeed, Conrad Clay's own mother becomes upset when he speaks in black English, and his parents' racism, either implicit or explicit, causes him great pain.

I wrote **THE COLOR MIDNIGHT MADE**, in part, to express that pain, to find a voice for my particular experience of being an outsider, and to take stock of where America is right now, both in terms of race and in terms of what life might look like to a white boy who inherits America's legacy of racial division. Conrad Clay initially refuses to accept that legacy, to see things the way the world wants him to—at the story's onset, he is blind to racial colors and division.

These are very serious themes, of course, and that is why I made sure to suffuse the novel with humor. As the Greek dramatists well knew, comedy is perhaps one of the only ways we can deal with tragedy—is, in fact, tragedy's concomitant. This is why Richard Pryor's comedy was so penetrating: watching him, you never knew whether to laugh or cry. It is my hope that readers of my novel have a similar experience.

continued

What reasons were behind your choice to use such inventive language in writing THE COLOR MIDNIGHT MADE?

I wanted language to function almost as its own character, to represent, in a Whitman-like sense, America itself. Ours is a country filled with new voices, of linguistic invention, and I felt I had to create a language to tell this very American story. In addition to that goal, I had to consider the socio-economic setting of the story. Where alienation is married to poverty, you often find that language becomes the coin of the streets, and one of the few sources of pride. When one cannot afford material accoutrements, language becomes a prime possession. The ability to wield language with élan is highly valued in African American culture, and this was something I absorbed early on in my childhood, as does my main character, Conrad Clay: he and his consorts are crack linguists, often inventing new language, and their very selves, as they go along. This is how, I believe, young urban children achieve a sense of grace.

As a child, my peers and I had an unassuageable hunger for linguistic invention, for new words, and I took this into consideration when I created a voice for this novel. Conrad Clay's voice is an admixture of the black English argot of his neighborhood, the southern dialect of his Grandmother, local terms and phraseology the roots of which go back to Alameda's Naval history, rap-derived rhythms, and of course, words that he and his peers have invented.

A careful reader will notice that Conrad actually seems to have two voices: one when he's with his black friends, another when he's at home. This bilingualism is a by-product of his particular cultural setting: multi-racial urban America. The phenomenon of white people conversing in two distinct dialects–black English and white English–is still rather novel (although increasing less so), yet such bilingualism has long been practiced by African Americans forced to negotiate the exigencies of a white-dominated world. A lot of defense mechanisms are built into black English as it is often practiced, and this is surely where the warmth, anger, pathos, and humor of black English originates–you hear it in the pushing and pulling and stretching of the English language. This is why you will find many of my characters modulating their speech, depending on the situation. It is important to note that there is not one black English, but rather an infinite variety of dialects. I wanted to capture this rich variety of language, and have thus represented many different dialects of English in the novel.

Your protagonist is a young boy who seriously considers turning to violence–something we're seeing a lot of in the media lately. Are you trying to make a point here?

There's a reason for America's renascent interest in its boys (as reflected in bestselling non-fiction books like *Real Boys*)–contemporary boys are clearly struggling under the manifold pressures that American life is throwing at them: physical and emotional abuse, family problems, violent role models, drugs, racism, competition. It's quite obvious that the world, to many boys, looks like a maelstrom of violence, alienation, and coldness. This is why they spend their young lives attempting unsuccessfully to escape from this determined reality. It's a wonder any child can brook the sheer weight of contemporary life, and yet they are often asked to do so alone–especially boys, who fall victim to a culture that tends to render its males insensate. Boys learn early on that to share feelings is to be vulnerable, and vulnerability is something for which one can be punished. You see it in the way boys parry each other's attempts at showing weakness. And yet boys have just as much need to communicate their pains and worries as girls do. So you have all these despondent boys across America who are locked in their own self-made prisons, either inured to their feelings or filled with shame because they have feelings for which no outlet exists. Naturally, this state of affairs can lead to desperate acts on the part of boys, pleas for help that often manifest themselves in extreme and even violent ways.

continued

In **THE COLOR MIDNIGHT MADE**, Conrad Clay struggles between the dictates of a racially constructed society and his own burgeoning desire to erase any racial boundaries. Thus, he faces the pressure of trying to *belong*. But belonging is more complex in today's world when communities are multi-cultural and the boundaries are shifting. In addition to these struggles, Conrad also suffers at the hands of an intemperate father and a neglectful mother. So, like so many boys in America, he's getting it from all sides, the result of which is his desire to efface himself, to disappear, as he says, "like a halibut." At the same time, the bomb he builds reflects a desperate need for attention.

I believe this is the state of many young boys today, and in this sense, **THE COLOR MIDNIGHT MADE** is a portrait of the dangers and joys of modern boyhood.

Why are colorblindness and notions of vision so pervasive in THE COLOR MIDNIGHT MADE?

Vision and colorblindness are tied to identity–Conrad's identity. In terms of vision, Conrad's identity is made up of both how he sees (the world, himself), and how he is seen (by his peers, by his parents, by the world at large). And isn't this, after all, how our identities are constructed?

In the beginning of the novel, Conrad's newly discovered colorblindness rends open a gap between himself and his peers, across which he then gazes at his peers and his peers gaze back at him. Here, then, is an example of how vision plays a role in creating identity: Conrad's growing sense of his own otherness, of his differentiation from his friends, is a consequence of being looked upon by them. This is one way alienation occurs in young people. Of course, Conrad struggles to close the gap between his peers and himself: he dissembles the fact of his colorblindness because he worries that it will further differentiate himself in a world shot-through with difference.

Yet Conrad's colorblindness is not simply a metaphor for his failure to see racial difference–it can also be seen as symbolic of his inability to perceive himself, to know himself. In defence of his colorblindness, he tells us in the opening lines of the book that he can see special colors in everyone but himself–his own identity, in a visual sense, is occluded. By the end of the book, however, Conrad arrives at kind of perspicuity, where, in that diaphanous sky, he recognizes his own color, the color Midnight had described to him a few scenes earlier.

Some people have compared THE COLOR MIDNIGHT MADE to Irish novels like *Paddy Clark Ha Ha Ha*, with which it shares a working-class setting. It's true that, in America, you don't see a lot of contemporary novels set in a blue-collar context, perhaps because most writers were raised in middle or upper-class families, and their novels reflect their life-experiences. Why did you choose to set your novel in the blue-collar section of Alameda, near the Naval Station?

My mother is an educated woman, but because she had to raise my sister and me alone, we ended up living in blue-collar neighborhoods. She was employed for much of my young life by the Navy, as was my eventual step-father, so the Naval Station was an environment with which I was very familiar, one that provided a kind of Dickensian world of odd and interesting characters. And my reference to Dickens is not arbitrary–I had similar experiences as he did: I knew poverty and privation in my childhood; I had a sometimes difficult relationship with my mother; I developed, through a colorful childhood, a sense of compassion for the downtrodden; I lifted myself up out of a working-class life to become a writer. So I wanted my first novel to reflect these experiences, and setting it in the flinty, rude streets of my childhood on the purlieus of the Naval Station felt right.

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That the story takes place during the late 90s tech boom in the Bay Area had everything to do with my concern that a large but inconspicuous substratum of the population was not getting rich and was thus being forgotten. Remember, Clinton had begun closing down military bases around the country, and, at the very height of the Bay Area's financial frenzy, the Alameda Naval Station shut down, leaving an entire community of workers, mostly African-American, stranded. Like certain sections of its immediate neighbor, Oakland, the area around the Naval Station existed as a sort of impoverished penumbra on the border line of the wealthier greater Bay Area–it still looks like that today. Mention Alameda to most people and they think gentrification: that it's a quaint island filled with old Victorians ready to be fixed up and sold for great sums of money. Yet much of the area between Webster Street and the Station has fallen into disrepair. There are uninhabited buildings and weedy, dispiriting lots of land. And the abandoned Naval structures lend an almost sepulchral quality to the place. Thus, **THE COLOR MIDNIGHT MADE** is suffused with the provisional air that attends the closing of any large military base, and this sense that things are ending echoes the breaking up of Conrad's family, and indeed, the end of his childhood as he knew it.

The novel's island setting is no accident of geographical whimsy, but rather a reflection of the state of entrapment Conrad feels: the island is his literal prison, from which he wishes to escape to another, happier life.

THE COLOR MIDNIGHT MADE isn't a typical coming of age novel, in that the protagonist never grows beyond the age of ten, and the story is set in present times rather than in the era of your childhood. Why did you make these choices?

I believe I was spared writing the usual coming of age first novel–in which a young twenty something protagonist struggles with adulthood–because I turned to writing later than most. I'd had a full career as a fine artist before becoming a writer, and I didn't begin this novel until I was thirty. At the time, I was contemplating two different ideas for my first novel–one was the story of Conrad Clay, a character from a short story I'd written, and the other idea was about a twenty something young man who comes to New York to be an artist. It was around this time that I came across a felicitous quote, which said, apropos the difficulty of writing about childhood, that you have to be old to write young. This seems right to me: Twain was a middle-aged man when he wrote Huck Finn. So I decided that the bigger challenge would be to write a novel entirely in a young boy's voice. It's actually rarely done in literary novels, and yet some of my favorite books are told in the voice of a young narrator. I wasn't exactly middle-aged, but at thirty, I was confident that enough time had passed since my childhood to write well about it. Perhaps I was naïve, but I felt qualified to tackle such a book.

My reasons for grounding the novel in contemporary times rather than in my childhood were two-fold. First, I didn't want to be limited by having to reproduce the particular signifiers of, let's say, the 70s–especially when it comes to language and voice. As I mentioned earlier, I wanted to be able to create, like Whitman did, a new voice to express my take on America. By setting the novel now, I felt at liberty to create such a voice for my protagonist.

The second reason has to do with my desire to capture what I think is an amazing time in America's history–our present. You see, I came of age in the East Bay of the late 60s and early 70s, when the most fashionable variety of liberalism was a hopeful and roseate adherence to the "melting-pot" idea. Fresh on the heels of "Black is Beautiful," and the Black Power movement, blacks and whites called each other "Brother" or, in the case of my particular neighborhood where the feeling ran thick: "Blood." In some ways, those were palmier, more innocent times–even the Black Panther's violent version of idealism feels kind of innocent today, especially after all the fervent, sometimes separatist multi-cultural rhetoric of the

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80s and 90s. The sentiments of brotherhood from my childhood are a spectral presence in my novel, and they aren't necessarily at odds with what is now happening in the culture. In fact, the current crop of urban kids, with whom I spent a lot of time during the composition of my novel, are in many ways a throw-back to late 60s and early 70s in that their attitudes and identities are pan-ethnic and pan-cultural: they unselfconsciously embody and practice the melting-pot idea rather than theorize about it. So by giving my novel a contemporary setting, I was able to tap into these new developments. My white protagonist is accepted by many of the characters as one of the "bruthas." Of course the seeds of racial division run deep, and at a certain point in the book, Conrad is singled out for what he is: a whiteboy.

I might also add that I purposely set the novel against the backdrop of Clinton's impeachment, which resonates on a personal level with the narrator's own sense of shame, guilt and secrecy.

Speaking of shame: the book opens with Conrad learning that he's colorblind and his resultant shame. Why is shame such a large theme in your novel?

I alluded to shame in my earlier discussion of vision and this is no accident: there is a strong connection between shame and being visible. Being seen, and *how* one is being seen, are of primary concern to a developing child–it's the way the sense of self is manifested, and with self-consciousness comes shame. I don't believe one can write honestly from a child's point of view without shame being a central theme–it's one of the essential conditions of childhood.

In addition to being stared at by his peers (and thus becoming an outsider), Conrad has a lot to feel shameful about: his parents' fighting; his being white; his not being saved by Jesus; his fiduciary relationship with his father; his father's alcoholism and lost job; his parents' inability to pay the rent; his colorblindness. In Conrad's mind these are all equal. Some readers might ask why the book opens with him failing the colorblind test, why colorblindness is such a big deal. As adults, we understand that his colorblindness isn't the end of the world, but in Conrad's mind it looms just as large as his father's secret of losing his job. This is what children do: they over-evaluate shameful moments.

There are many scenes in which adults voice their frustration with life in front of Conrad, or say things which other adults might try to protect a child from. Are you trying to make a point here?

One of my goals when I sat down to write **THE COLOR MIDNIGHT MADE** was to address how adults often do not create boundaries, how they fail in their efforts to shield children from the vicissitudes of adult life. Divorce is perhaps the most extreme exemplar of this, because the children of a divorce have to learn about the frailty of love before they should ever have to, and certainly before they are capable of understanding the complexities of adult love (are we ever capable of such understanding?). I am the product of an early divorce, and I wanted to portray the pain of having to be exposed to the vagaries of a broken marriage.

But there are much more subtle ways in which adults shower their children with the frustrations of their lives, often leaving the child with a premonitory sadness for adult life. I want the reader of my novel to experience this phenomenon through the eyes of the child. Even Mary, who is such a strong mother-figure in Conrad's life, can't help but give off plangent sighs, in Conrad's presence, of disillusionment and disappointment about her boyfriend in particular and men in general. In fact, Mary's beauty salon functions as a kind of lyrical keyhole through which Conrad views the adult world: sex, abandonment, poverty, the frustrations, longings, and joys of black women–all of these Conrad hears about in Mary's shop.

continued

The book is filled with colorful, larger-than-life characters, and Conrad's is a colorful experience in more ways than one. He seems to spend a lot of time on his own. How much of this comes from your real life?

First of all, one of the reasons I think this novel is so filled with big-hearted eccentrics and lovable innocents is that my childhood was essentially a parade of Dickensian characters in the form of my mother's boyfriends–from Spyder, a fierce-looking but sweet biker on whose chopper I clocked a lot of mileage, to a wide assortment of Vietnam vets and Navy men. Certainly, this book was also informed by my growing up in the East Bay of the late 60s and early 70s, where I soaked up a rich cultural stew of Black Power, labor unions, and leftist academics. And parts of this book could not have been written had my mother not forced me to attend a Southern Baptist church every Sunday for my entire childhood.

As for the hero of my novel spending time alone–this was my experience of childhood. My mother was impecunious, partly because she was supporting two children by herself, and partly because of her improvident nature. One of the byproducts of an economically struggling family is that the parents (if there are two) are often overburdened, and the child is left to his or her own devices. Hence the freedom to intersect with the characters of the community.

Children also have an implacable hunger for love, and if they aren't receiving enough love at home, they seek it out elsewhere. This is what Conrad does: he interacts with shop owners, fast-food employees, people in bars. Like Conrad, I was a habitué of the food stands, convenient stores, bus stops, and car washes of my neighborhood. I counted rest-home cooks, professional wrestlers, and transsexual tennis players among my personal friends. One could rightly argue that so much time spent alone in such an insalubrious environment is not very favorable to the development of a child. Yet for me, and for the hero of my novel, it is the colorful characters offered up by just such an environment that instill in you a heightened sensitivity to the promises of life.

To a lonely boy filled with disquiet, the variety and diversity of strangers can be a life-ring, a light-and-color-filled antidote to the gloominess of a broken home.

End

WASHINGTON SQUARE PRESS

NEWS

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THE COLOR MIDNIGHT MADE

A Novel

By

ANDREW WINER

Praise for THE COLOR MIDNIGHT MADE:

"Is it possible to write convincingly about the underbelly of life and at the same time tickle the reader? Andrew Winer has done just that—created a Huck Finn for the new century in this wry, poignant, and very dear first novel."
—**Elinor Lipman,** author of ***The Inn at Lake Devine***

"Every sentence is a surprise and a delight in this poignant story of a boy's growing up…. Winer absolutely nails the comic/tragic textures of modern urban childhood."
—**Janet Fitch,** author of ***White Oleander***

"In Conrad Clay, Andrew Winer has created a truly wonderful character whose exposures to the cruelties, joys and broken promises of the adult world are alternately funny and desolating."
—**Glen David Gold,** author of ***Carter Beats the Devil***

"They say I can't see colors. They're lying. I can see colors in people. Moms is yellow. Pops is camouflage. Our teacher Mr. Garabedian is tan like a weed. I got a color for everybody. Except me."

The voice—cocksure, imaginative, vulnerable—belongs to Conrad Clay, the hero of Andrew Winer's debut novel, **THE COLOR MIDNIGHT MADE** (A Washington Square Press Trade Paperback Reprint; June 24, 2003; $13.00). At age ten, Conrad is diagnosed with colorblindness, but it's the world—not just his sight—that has become untrustworthy. As his parents' marriage implodes, Conrad's search for his own "color" takes him beyond the bounds of a broken home and into a community afflicted by poverty and racial division. By turns hilarious, desolating, and wise, **THE COLOR MIDNIGHT MADE** takes stock of where America is now from the point of view of an unforgettable ten-year-old boy.

The story unfolds in 1990s Alameda, a mixed-race community in the San Francisco Bay area. The closing of the local Navy base has left hundreds without jobs. Among those affected is Conrad's father, whose drinking and violent tendencies worsen with unemployment. Meanwhile, Conrad's mother retreats into neurotic bitterness; she's the sort of woman who takes pills because she's allergic to the cigarettes she smokes. Conrad's grandmother is his one source of stability, but her health is rapidly deteriorating.

A white boy in a primarily black school, Conrad seeks relief from his parents by immersing himself in the skateboarding, hip-hop culture of his "street gritty" classmates. He finds a second home with the family of his best friend, a black boy named Loop. Mary, Loop's single mother, supervises a household bustling with three kids, including Loop's older brother Midnight. Having blinded himself several years earlier in a gun accident, Midnight has a unique relationship to vision. In a wonderfully lyrical scene, he helps Conrad realize his own color, "a color that no one has ever seen."

The pain and sadness in Conrad's story is imbued with the comedy and energy of youth, and his worldview mixes innocence and street smarts in equal amounts. When his family is about to get evicted because they can't afford the rent, he breaks into the house of his next door neighbor, Ms. Van Pelt. Instead of stealing her money, he falls in love with her when he spies her taking a bath. Still determined to help his parents, he writes the landlord and offers, in exchange for the rent, the trading card his father gave him on his seventh birthday—his most prized possession, because it represents a time when his family was still happy.

Conrad has a unique way of seeing the world, and a verbal inventiveness that finds poetry in potentially depressing surroundings. Alameda's telephone wires sag "from too many people talking through them." His street hangs off the main boulevard "like a dead arm," with houses

missing "like knocked out teeth." When Loop and Conrad skateboard to escape troubles at home, their anger gets "rolled into the cement." Alameda may be a dying town, but for Conrad it is also a place of transformation and discovery. The sky above is "a ripe peach hanging low and dirty" that he reaches up to touch "like skin."

THE COLOR MIDNIGHT MADE contains a rich, multiracial cast of characters, and moments of prejudice inevitably leak into their interactions. But Conrad's journey is not, primarily, about race. Having grown up among whites and blacks for as long as he can remember, he neither has nor seeks a racial identity. More than a quest for his own "color," Conrad is searching for a larger sense of connection, of belonging, of grace. He seeks love and life wherever he can find them, whether he's skateboarding with Loop or taking a walk with his grandmother.

First-time novelist Andrew Winer has written a timeless story that is also fiercely contemporary in its vision. Featuring one of the most engaging heroes in recent fiction, **THE COLOR MIDNIGHT MADE** will charm readers with its pitch-perfect evocation of the joys and hardships of being young.

Washington Square Press is a division of Simon & Schuster, the publishing operation of Viacom Inc.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andrew Winer grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area, and currently lives in Southern California. He received his M.F.A. in creative writing at the University of California, Irvine and is co-author of a screenplay that recently sold to Fox/New Regency. This is his first novel. Visit Andrew Winer at www.andrewwiner.com.

THE COLOR MIDNIGHT MADE
A Novel
by Andrew Winer
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Chapter 1

They say I can't see colors. They're lying. I can see colors in *people.* Moms is yellow. Pops is camouflage. Our teacher Mr. Garabedian is tan like a weed. I got a color for everybody. Except me.

I told my best friend Loop he was silver and black, like the Oakland Raiders. Loop gave me a slug.

"I *already* black," he said.

So he went solo with silver.

It started when we had to get our eyes checked by Dr. Chow, Eye Master of the Universe. He was already waiting in the library when we sleazed in. Mr. Garabedian said we had to keep a tight line and walk in pairs. We were a centipede of backpacks.

Everyone talked loud but not me. I always go quiet in the yellow light of the old library. Those books are talking too much already.

Eye Master of the Universe sat near Biography, bald and wearing a white coat. He was testing us one at a time and taking forever. Loop pulled out of line to get a look.

"W'sup with this stupid test?" Loop said. "This is for squids. Only whiteboys get their eyes checked."

"I know," I said. "W'sup with that?"

Yeah, I was a whiteboy. Jack London Primary only had fourteen. But nobody, including Loop, thought of me as one. Loop said I musta been black in a past life, so it was cool I was hangin wid the bruthas in this one, since I had prior experience and did not be comin at it on the honky-ass tip.

So I was okay.

We were almost to the front of the line. My stomach went tight each time I looked at Eye Master. I had to pass his test in front of Loop and the other gritties, or else I'd look like a squid.

I lifted my eyes up to the library's high arched ceiling and took a deep breath. The hanging lamps glowed softly above me like twelve old suns, and the air tasted calm and quiet and as yellow as it looked. It tasted like books and breath. It smelled older than Earth.

It was our turn and Eye Master made me go first. You had to sit in the chair and cover one eye at a time and read a dumb chart on the wall. I had it all sewed up until from out of nowhere he flashed some cards at me. Each had a bunch of color dots smashed together like grapes. "Tell me the number you see," he said.

The first three cards were easy: Six, Eight, Zero. But the next few didn't have any numbers in them -- just colored dots. Behind me, Loop and Clarence and Douglas whispered "Seven!" and "Two!" and every goddamn number but I couldn't see anything.

Come on you dots, I said, You gotta have a number in there.

Eye Master said, "Are you sure, Conrad? Try it again."

I ran my tongue over my back teeth and gave it all my mentals but the dots weren't talking to me, except to say: *Hi, dots ain't in right now but please leave a message, thanks, and yo mama!*

Eye Master picked five special cards out of his stack and shuffled them. It was real important I try my best this time, he said. I squeezed my finger into a sticky gum wad under my chair, and he flashed me all five cards: "Anything? -- how about *this?* Anything? *This?* -- or this? -- or *this?"*

"Nope." "Nope." "Nope." "Nope." "Nope!"

He stuck the last card in my face and gave it a shake. *"No?* -- you don't see a number?"

"Nope."

Eye Master's mouth was a straight line.

"Come with me," he said, taking my arm and pulling me past everybody. Loop and the other gritties stepped back. I heard them whisper I was going blind.

In the librarian's office Eye Master closed the door and pulled the shades so the others couldn't see us. The office didn't have the good old smell of books like out in the library -- it smelled sharp and mean, like metal and new paint. The light was different too. It sprayed from a white fluorescent tube and ricocheted off the walls and X-rayed everything in the room. If I closed my eyes, I could see the skeleton of the chair and the desk and even of Eye Master, who sat there writing on a piece of paper.

"What's wrong?" I asked him.

With his other hand he pressed his bald head in one spot, leaving a white mark. "You're partly colorblind," he said.

"No I am not."

"Yes you are."

He was still writing. I looked down at his black shoes. "No I am not."

"You're red and green colorblind," he said. "You have trouble with purples, pinks, any hues that contain red or green."

He sounded pretty damn happy about that.

"But I can see colors. I can see red. I can see green too."

"Not the green everyone *else* is seeing. You see colors *differently* than other people. And you have difficulty telling red and green apart."

My throat felt dry as chalk. "I can see colors," I said.

He sighed and turned to me. "Look, the eye detects colors by having an equal balance of rods and cones, and you have less cones than a person who sees colors normally."

I didn't know what to say about that. Eye Master seemed to have an awful lot to write about my problem, and from what I could make out, the other gritties were right: I was headed for being blind. Today I couldn't see colors. Tomorrow I wouldn't be able to see *things.*

Pops had said fifth grade was gonna grease me.

Eye Master handed me the paper and smiled. "Give that to your parents."

Loop and Clarence and Douglas were waiting out in the library. The way they stared at me you'd have thought I was blind already. "W'sup?" "'Sup?" "'Sup?" they said.

I couldn't look at them. I was a squid.

I walked right out of the library and into the cold blue afternoon light and didn't stop until I reached the basketball courts where I pulled out Eye Master's note and pressed it against the metal post. It was written to *The Parents of Conrad Clay* and said I was not colorblind complete, but pretty damn close.

I stared at the note and swallowed three times. It didn't seem right that a piece of paper could change your whole life. But there it was.

I stuffed the note back in my Raiders jacket and ran all the way out to Naval Housing, where kids screamed and spidered over the monkey bars and a boy with mud on his cheeks pointed a space gun at me. I kept going out to Slime Canal, past the Ferry, and past a ship from China named *Cho Yang.* I watched a pigeon flap out of my way. I wanted to see things like everyone else did. If I practiced my colors enough maybe I'd see them right -- like a brutha. Don't worry now eyes, I said, We're gonna set you straight. We just gotta practice:

Yo pigey pidge! I said, You're gray.

Too easy.

I yelled at the ship from China, Yo *Cho!* You're white and red stainy! Get a new paint job please!

Hey you yellow weed, smash! Now you're juice! And what's hangin old black cracky tire?

I pulled out the note from Eye Master of the Universe again. Then I folded it into a spaceship, added a rock for the motor, and launched it into Slime Canal. I didn't wanna worry Moms and Pops with my discount eyes. They had enough trouble. Good-bye note, Peace! I said. Have fun at the bottom of Slime Canal. *Plunk!*

Now you are a sturgeon taco.